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LONDON GUARDIAN
17 June 1980

Anti-hijack piston in CIA tricks

From Harold Jackson
in Washington

Evidence of the further reaches of the intelligence business have emerged in America, courtesy of the Freedom of Information Act. Over 3,000 pages of studies by the CIA into every variety of dirty trick have been obtained by the New York Times and reveal the Agency's perpetual obsession with James Bond-style gadgetry.

The documents have been heavily censored before being released and it is difficult to discern which of the prospects ever got beyond the musings of the Agency's boffins.

One that never made it was

the anti-hijacking device proposed for installation in commercial aircraft. The agency dreamed up a giant piston to be located behind the pilot's seat. If a would-be hijacker entered the cockpit the captain would push the button and the hijacker would find himself propelled at speed along the aisle.

No reason is offered for abandonment of the gadget.

One of the continuing themes throughout the papers is the research into every possible variety of incapacitating agent, chemical and electrical. There are references to something described as a "jet-propelled medicine ball" which seems to have been a poisoned pellet similar to that

used in the case of Georgi Markov, the Bulgarian exile murdered in London. It is not clear whether the Americans were trying to develop their own version or whether the research was focused on what the Russians might be evolving.

Among the electrical devices there was the anti-terrorist net which would have served to paralyse its victim. But the CIA evaluation notes that "unfortunately, the data provided by the manufacturer are not completely explicit." There was also an idea for a hand-held gadget which would fire a "net, dart, barb, burr, adhesive" or something similar, carrying two electrical wires. The operator would then push a button to send a 30,000 volt charge through the target. The snag was that "during tests, incapacitation periods were limited to four seconds or less." The documents contain numerous references to something called Project Offen, a study of the effects of rare drugs carried out by the US Army Chemical Corps from 1968 onwards. Much of the research was into chemicals which influenced human behaviour. The agency was not particularly impressed by the results, noting that though some seemed to be effective at changing moods or behaviour, "the techniques are not as efficacious or finely tuned as the popular media leads one to believe."